

Skopje, 4 May 2010

***Subject: The disturbing state of the Bulgarian cultural and historical monuments in the Republic of Macedonia***

Dear Sir/Madame,

Understanding the important role of civil society organizations in promoting democratic principles, cultural diversity and stable inter-ethnic relations, the Bulgarian Cultural Club – Skopje is striving to build and establish a society that will be part of a united Europe without borders.

Since its foundation in May 2008, our organization has been collecting data on Bulgarian monuments, cemeteries and tombstones in the Republic of Macedonia. We have witnessed many disturbing cases of deliberately destroyed monuments. These are not isolated cases and show the authorities' tendency of ruthless treatment of the Bulgarian cultural and historical heritage in the Republic of Macedonia. We protest against this uncivilized practice and the indifference of the relevant institutions. Because of this our organization questions their honesty regarding the effective implementation of European values and standards.

We provide you with detailed documentation on some of the destroyed Bulgarian monuments. The most outrageous examples are briefly explained as follows.

Appendix A shows photographs of the grave of priest Iliya Gabrovaliev in the church yard of the village of Robovo, municipality of Strumica. The gravestone reads: "one of the first champions of the Bulgarian national spirit in the region of Strumica". The part of the notice on the gravestone that reads "Bulgarian national spirit" has been erased.

Photographs B.1 and B.2 of the Appendix B show the church of St. Nedelya in Bitolya and the inscription above its entrance. The inscription reads: "This holy church of St. Martyr Nedelya was erected with the contribution of the Bulgarians under the diocese of His Holy Grace Benedict of Byzantium who sanctified it in Bitolya on 13 October 1863". The part of the inscription that reads "Bulgarians" has been erased.

In the yard of the church of St. Nedelya, one may find the Ilinden Cemetery of the freedom fighters, who fought in the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising of 1903. The cemetery is in terrible condition and is almost abandoned. As photographs B.3 and B.4 show, the original gravestone of the voivode Dimko Nikolov is destroyed and it is replaced by a new gravestone written with the post-1945 alphabet. The original inscription, written in Bulgarian, reads "Rest in peace, dear Bulgarian son". The part of the inscription that reads "dear Bulgarian son" has been erased.

Appendix C contains photographs of some of the nine Bulgarian military graves from World War I in the Strumica cemetery. The tragic state of the graves is self-evident. Some have been deliberately destroyed or damaged. Parts of the epitaphs have been fully altered or erased, notably words referring to the Bulgarian fatherland, but also the emblematic Bulgarian letter “Ъ”.

In this context, we would also like to mention the cases of the destroyed Tsar Ferdinand’s fountain (Ferdinandova cheshma) and the detonated in 1966 monument of Colonel Konstantin Kavarnaliev, who died in World War I at the battle of Doyran. In contrast to the restored British, German and French military monuments, the Macedonian authorities do not permit the restoration of these and other Bulgarian monuments, which is a clear demonstration of double standards.

We are very concerned about the lack of political climate for generating a common understanding of history, which we believe is the main reason for the abovementioned barbarian acts. The textbooks used in the education system contain biased ideological statements, representing the neighbors as enemies, which reminds one of Cold War terminology. This is liable to increase tensions with neighbors and create internal divisions.

The primary responsibility of the politicians and the media is to contribute to a culture of mutual respect, understanding, trust and tolerance. This could be achieved through joint celebrations of common historic events with neighboring EU Member States, as an essential first step for a better understanding of history and the maintenance of good neighborly relations. In this regard, we are deeply convinced that the remains of the Comintern’s old policies on the Balkans and the recent phenomenon of so-called “antiquisation” should be laid to rest.

The destruction of monuments should not be happening in a country that aspires to become a member of the European Union and NATO. We believe that the institutions of the Republic of Macedonia will understand how important it is to preserve the Bulgarian monuments according to the relevant international standards.

For these reasons, we respectfully appeal for the restoration, preservation and maintenance of the monuments that belong to the Bulgarian cultural and historical heritage.

Sincerely yours,

  
**Lazar Mladenov**

President of the Bulgarian Cultural Club – Skopje

